

**Keynote Address to the 10th IAVE Asia-Pacific Regional Volunteer Conference
Volunteerism: The Unfinished Miracle**

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Abstract

In a keynote address to delegates to the 2005 Asia-Pacific Regional Volunteer Conference of IAVE, The International Association for Volunteer Efforts, in Hong Kong, the author advocates that volunteerism is an “unfinished miracle” embracing a social spirit “as old as human need and compassion” that is still “bringing new perspectives in community life and development worldwide.”

Key Words: challenges, United Nations, volunteerism

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or official policies of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

Greetings and congratulations to the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE); The Agency for Volunteer Service; The Hong Kong Council of Volunteering.

I am delighted to greet this Conference on behalf of my many friends around the world who are bringing the spirit of volunteering through many practical activities and programs worldwide to people in need.

I am delighted as well to be once again in Hong Kong, this beautiful gateway to Asia, after several years' absence.

I begin with a few words from Winston Churchill who said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.”

To Churchill's observation I would add one from Jane Addams, a founder of social service work in the United States. Addams said, “The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain...until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.”

Volunteerism, the focus and driving force of this Conference, is in its organized forms quite new in the world. In its many forms and heritages, it is bringing new perspectives in community life and development worldwide. Its spirit, however, is as old as human need and compassion. What's new in volunteerism is not its expression and shape but its massive, organized growth. It is this extraordinary growth in volunteering virtually everywhere in the world that leads me to refer to it as a miracle. That so many people in so many programs of caring would out of simple personal goodness give themselves to helping others in their need is unprecedented in history. There is no exact word for it except miraculous.

In its modern times beginnings, volunteerism commonly brought a single, caring individual to the aid of another in need, sometimes alone, sometimes with assistants. Many countries have traditions of the single, caring leader - such as Henry Dunant, the Swiss founder of the international Red Cross and Red Crescent movement and also - less well known - the

founder of the YMCA movement. For such distinctions, Dunant shared in the award of the very first Nobel Peace Prize. Dunant also took action that is a precedent to today's volunteering: He organized the common people of a village to care for a battle's wounded and ill soldiers. Dunant thus joined the leaders throughout history who have made caring and charity a gift of all people, not just the privileged, to fellow beings suffering and in need. That same impulse nowadays joins hundreds and thousands and hundreds of thousands in caring for uncounted numbers who suffer from disaster, illness, and civil disruption.

To begin our celebration here of volunteerism in our present time, let's briefly refresh our memory of the United Nations International Year of Volunteers, just four years ago. I am delighted, by the way, to meet on this platform with Ad De Raad, the coordinator of United Nations volunteers, whose predecessor, Sharon Capeling, then coordinator of United Nations volunteers, I worked with during preparations for the Year of Volunteers.

In his summary report of the International Year, the United Nations Secretary General wrote:

(T)he year was successful by any account. One hundred and twenty-three National Committees and scores of local, regional and state committees were formed. The official web site received close to 9 million hits. A heightened recognition of volunteerism in development resulted from the plethora of activities, including efforts to measure the contributions of volunteers in every part of the world. There were marked improvements in legislative frameworks and national and local infrastructure for voluntary action, and networks were established among stakeholders from

(g)overnments, [regional organizations], the United Nations system, civil society, the private sector and elsewhere.

The International Year's first goal was "greater acknowledgment of the diversity, value and richness of traditional and modern forms of volunteerism and its contribution to society." Research, the Year's report said, was the key to enhancing recognition. It cited in that connection studies of volunteer activities in Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Mongolia, and Singapore in this part of the world as well as in a host of European, African, and North American nations, including my own native Canada.

Many of the countries named in the U.N. report have combined efforts for information exchange and to facilitate volunteerism development in their own and other countries. One country created a permanent national forum on volunteerism that is chaired by the deputy prime minister. The director of a key country's research institute on volunteerism is a speaker to this very conference. Permanent national commissions on volunteerism have been organized in some nations to advise policy-makers in national and regional governments.

All these activities and much else besides are reported and celebrated in a report that is now four years old. Particularly noteworthy in recent years has been the support and cooperation extended by the United Nations system and other international and intergovernmental bodies such as the European Union, the national Olympic committees, the World Youth Volunteer Summit in Tokyo, and the world's national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, as whose international secretary general I had the honor to serve.

Earlier this year, the United Nations Secretary General in a report on follow-up to implementation of the International Year of Volunteers wrote as follows:

For the period since 2001, it is clear that the momentum built up over the course of the International Year has continued to provide the stimulation behind a vibrant volunteer movement. Most of the recommendations proposed by the General Assembly in its International Year follow-up resolution are being taken up by governments and the United Nations system, as well as by other stakeholders from civil society and the private sector.

“Volunteerism, when properly channeled,” the Secretary General continued, “is a powerful force for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.” He went on to comment:

The environment for an expansion of volunteerism worldwide is as favorable as it has ever been. The concept of a global society is emerging, with shifting relationships between the North and the South, most notably away from the giver and receiver model. Opportunities for citizens to be engaged through voluntary action at the local level.... are steadily expanding. Acceptance is spreading for the idea that all people have a right to development and that active participation through volunteerism is one important avenue for exercising that right. New communication technologies make it ever more possible to build contacts and support networks among individual volunteers and organizations that involve volunteers on a local, regional and global basis.

The many distinguished programs through which volunteers are working today will hopefully form the basis for an international

gathering or event at which programs and achievements in volunteering since the International Year will be celebrated. What should be the goal and content of that celebration is something we all need to be thinking about so we can urge our views as the U.N. Secretary General and General Assembly act on a preliminary resolution on follow-up to the International Year. We should think deeply about what we want to see happen during the 10th anniversary of the Volunteer Year in 2011. Only if we begin now to lay careful plans and promote our vision of volunteer accomplishment at local, community, regional, national, and international levels will we be able to offer the world a genuine accounting of the many ways in which volunteerism has become a significant and vibrant part of life and caring in all countries and communities.

More or less simultaneously with the U. N. Year preparations and observance, The Johns Hopkins University in the United States began a comparative study of the fast-growing nonprofit sector that includes the voluntary service organizations. The university’s initial study, reported in the late 1990s, probed 22 nations. A continuation since of the study covered 37 of the 40 nations known to have voluntary service delivery organizations whose work is ongoing.

The nonprofit sector, a significant and growing economic force worldwide today, employs millions of full-time workers and enrolls in its panorama of service organizations hundreds of millions of volunteers. Governments often consider the nonprofit service organizations their first line of coping with social welfare needs and emergency events.

The Johns Hopkins studies have found that “while the nonprofit sector with its broad volunteer components has become a full-

fledged and valuable partner with government and the business sector in many countries, it often remains a highly fragile organism whose future is insecure.” The 2005 report of the study in my own country notes that government funding to service organizations “has become more short-term, more competitive and less predictable with support being targeted to programs and projects with little funding available to support overall organizational capacity.” As a result, the study says, “organizations and the people who work and volunteer with them are under considerable strain. (T)he ability of organizations to identify and respond to needs earlier, more quickly, and often more innovatively than government appears to be eroding....”

What challenges lie ahead? There are more challenges to volunteerism than you might suspect on a quiet morning at your well-ordered desk.

1. Do voluntary organizations do real things for real people? Are they seriously effective in dealing with social needs and problems, or do they simply go on forever treating the same symptoms and conditions? Do they deliver services uniformly and cost-effectively? What is a voluntary organization’s bottom line? These so-called legitimacy questions can have many answers. Some voluntary organizations are solidly established with their communities and constituencies; others for any number of leadership, participation, or funding reasons may not be solidly situated. The Johns Hopkins studies, for example, discovered that while charities in my native Canada “enjoy a high level of public trust and credibility, the number of volunteers appears to be declining and the number of [regular] donors is not growing.” In some countries, voluntary service organizations are emerging from political and organizational contexts that may affect their public acceptance or slow it substantially.
2. Building a voluntary organization’s capacity and accomplishment always requires time, diligence, good leadership, and broad support and participation. Anyone in this hall who has sought to build an effective voluntary program knows the world is full of things to trip over, slip on, and go wrong.
3. A sustainable financial base is essential to an organization’s survival and progress. Whatever may be a nation’s economic system, a volunteer organization must find its fiscal and expense underpinning in its country’s system of cost and planning for growth and public service. Mechanisms that nurture and support volunteerism activities, whether expressed in yuan, pound, dollar, ruble, franc, euro or any other currency system, must be carefully established, grown, and accounted for.
4. Voluntary organizations must be alert to social change in every sense of their being. Trends of change will alter community expectations, the content and methods of programs, and sometimes even the goals of the organization.
5. Like nations, voluntary organizations must find ways to work together. Even the treasured distinction between volunteers and paid staff must be narrowed in favor of these two groups of workers serving as partners at all levels of the organization.
6. No voluntary organization can endure for long without making change within

itself. Goals and policies must adapt to changing community interests and expectations. Programs must adapt to understandings and practices. The most successful volunteer organizations strive to maintain up-to-date awareness of events and trends in the community and work to keep ahead of service-related developments among the population they serve.

Those of you who have long memories might consider how much your personal life has changed in the decades of your lifetime, then *think* how much change is shaping time ahead, how much change is likely to take over the lives of your children and young organization members. All of us now accept that learning is a lifetime endeavor. So, accordingly, in voluntary response and achievement we must be ever alert to change in all we do.

But while we have many successes to be proud of, we must also face up to remaining challenges. We have much work to do in the creation and management of volunteer opportunities and service. Much remains to be done in attracting people into committed volunteer service. There is much to do in translating our enthusiasm for volunteer service into achievement for the people in every country who desperately need our care and help. And there is much to do in building and maintaining public support and

partnership at the community, regional, national, and international levels.

Our volunteerism miracle is far from built out. Perhaps it never will be completely. But so long as volunteerism is made of people like all of you here, we will always be building to success.

An American actor, Edward Olmos, once said, "What volunteers bring is the human touch, the individual, caring approach that no government program, however well-meaning and well-executed, can deliver." Let us keep that knowledge ever before us.

I conclude with some thoughts dispatched to us across a valley of 2,500 years by the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu:

Cultivate Virtue in your own person
And it will become a genuine part of you.

Cultivate it in the family
And it will abide.

Cultivate it in the community,
And it will live and grow.

Cultivate it in the state,
And it will flourish abundantly.

Cultivate it in the world,
And it will become universal.*

*Translation from Lao Tzu's *Tao Teh Ching* by John C.H. Wu.

About the Author

Dr. George Weber is Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian Dental Association (CDA) and CEO of Continovation Services Inc., a high-tech for-profit subsidiary of CDA. Dr. Weber provides senior level leadership to large Canadian and global organizations. He is Secretary General Emeritus of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, a global federal body based in Geneva, Switzerland, that directs, coordinates, and links the activities of the 180-plus national Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies, a distinction he received following seven years as its Chief Executive Officer. Dr. Weber attended McGill University in Canada and the Graduate School of Business Administration at Harvard University in the USA.